Alumni Spotlight: Alberto Rivera

This is the third edition of our “Alumni Spotlight”. The JEP staff is so incredibly proud of all the students who have worked with us and love to keep in touch with them post-graduation. We hold a special kind of pride in those who have remained in our USC neighborhood as teachers and administrators in the schools in which they spent time as tutors, mentors, or mini-course instructors as USC students through our many programs. Alberto Rivera is one such alum. A former USC Readers\textsuperscript{Plus} tutor at Vermont Elementary School, it is at Vermont where he remains nearly 20 years later. Alberto reflects on his time with Readers\textsuperscript{Plus}:

“I began my journey as an educator in August of 1997 when I was a freshman at USC and applied for this new program through JEP called “USC Readers”. In high school, I did community service working in an elementary school and figured I could use that experience and apply it towards the USC Readers program as I settled into my first year as a university student. I was trained by Tina and placed at Vermont where I began helping students one-on-one with their reading skills. I noticed how much help these students needed, but more than that they needed a mentor or role model in their lives. I remained with the program my full college career until I graduated from USC in 2001.

The program changed my life. While working with the program, I majored in General Studies to be an elementary school teacher in the future. I truly enjoyed helping the students I served and felt that as a teacher I could do even more. I also felt I could serve as a role model and demonstrate to the students that they, too, could be successful, and even become a USC student one day just like I was, but only if they work hard. After graduation, I was hired as a teacher at Vermont for thirteen years. I always welcomed USC Readers to my class, as well as other JEP programs, such as service-learning JEP mini-courses and the Young Scientist Program. I am still at Vermont, for the past three years serving as the Title 1 Coordinator monitoring and providing resources for at-risk and low-income students. I have made Vermont my second home for the past nineteen years. Never did I expect this to happen when I became a USC Reader. I am glad the program still exists because it is a life changing program, not only for the children served, but for the USC students as well.”

―Alberto Rivera, USC alum, Class of 2001

Introduction by Tina Koneazny, Associate Director of JEP
Our Staff

Central Staff

Tina Koneazny,
Associate Director
of JEP

Eric Mellis,
Literacy Director

Krystle Zhang,
Math Director

Alyssa Rubio,
Central Coordinator

Welcome New Tutors!

32nd St.
Farhan Chowdhury, Diane Chun,
Tucker Franz, Kerrigan Kilpatrick,
Zeinab Noureddine, Ashley U

Norwood
John Briney, Giselle Dominguez,
Jacob Dunn, Gregory Gallegos, Joel
Waltz, Joyce Wang, Andrea Williams

Vermont
Alfredo Arevalo, Tenzin Babu,
Evan Chen, Chloe Hudson,
Margaret O'Connor

Foshay
Juan Cameros,
Brigid Kelly,
Blanca Polio

Weemes
Julia Carboni, Gloria Cheng,
Dylan Doyle, Stephanie
Kuwornu, Stacey Lau

John Mack
Kortney Casanova, Nicolas
Lopez, Mato Standing Soldier

Science Center
Carol Abrajan, Divya
Jagadeesh, Charlie Ng
ReadersPlus tutors work with seven schools in the surrounding USC area, which include 32nd Street School, Foshay Learning Center, Norwood Elementary, Vermont Elementary, Weemes Elementary, John W. Mack Elementary, and Alexander Science Center. Our tutors provide individualized academic assistance to students from kindergarten to fifth grade, in either literacy or math. Additionally, our tutors participate in after school programs, which include homework help, yoga (Little Yoginis), literacy (Turn the Page), and STEM (Wonderkids).

The majority of our tutors are upperclassmen, with an almost 50/50 split between Literacy and Math tutor certification. Our tutors are in a wide variety of majors here at USC. A large majority of our tutors are in the STEM field, with the most common major being Biology. Some other majors include Film, Psychology, Business Administration, and Sociology.
For as long as I can remember, I have loved teaching. Sharing my knowledge with others and witnessing their mental growth fulfilled a dutiful role I loved to assume. Scrolling tediously through webpages, I was determined to find an opportunity at USC that would enable me to teach others. I eventually came across ReadersPlus and I was ecstatic when I did. Through ReadersPlus I would not only be able to teach young children, but also have the privilege to help develop their self-esteem and impact their lives. This impact— influencing the way a child will develop and live the rest of their life—is priceless. I felt that other job opportunities on campus would not achieve the same level of impact on others that I desired. Furthermore, ReadersPlus has grown to be a family to me, both my coworkers and my students. For our students, I believe that our sessions have become a time where they can hang out with their big siblings to play games and learn from them.

—Farhan Chowdhury, Math Tutor

Why I Chose ReadersPlus

In our after school program, we read to expose our kids to new worlds, cultures, and experiences that they may not experience in their daily lives. Turn the Page, a literacy program our Literacy Director created, has allowed myself and our Coordinator Eloisa to modify some of the lessons, recognizing particular holidays or events. On November 2nd, we developed a lesson to celebrate Dia de Los Muertos, or Day of the Dead. We discussed the intent of the holiday, how it came to be, and why it’s important in Mexican culture today. We brought calaveras (colorful skulls representing our lost ones) and ofrendas (shrines dedicated to a person’s life), and had the kids create their own on paper. They dedicated them to special people or animals in their lives who’ve passed on and shared them with the class. To top it off, the class indulged in some pan de muerto (traditional sweet bread made for the holiday). This lesson was the perfect in incorporating culture into Turn the Page and our afterschool program.

—Danial Gebre, Double Certified Tutor and Assistant Coordinator

Building a Student’s Confidence

One of my second graders was having a difficult time focusing on our lesson. At first, I was frustrated because this was the first time a student simply refused to behave during a one-on-one session. However, she told me that reading made her feel less smart, so I was then able to understand her situation more clearly. I suggested we take a short break outside on the playground to talk about why she was upset. I came to learn that the student she truly is, and the student she believed herself to be, were two very different people. I told her how well she was doing, and that it is okay to make mistakes, but practice and hard work are what make all the difference. We went back inside and finished the lesson, with smiles on our faces. Since then, she has improved her reading skills and hasn’t given up. So much of what we do at ReadersPlus is being a positive force in our students’ lives, building up their confidence, and helping them understand that the work they do in school can take them to so many places down the road.

—Evan Monroe, Literacy Tutor
Double-certified tutor Alexis Alexander won September’s Lesson Plan Challenge with a great literacy lesson plan for her 1st grader, which catered to her student’s learning styles and needs. Her lesson focused on capitalization and proper nouns, using the book *Fat Cat on a Mat* by Phil Roxbee Cox. She started off her lesson by reading aloud back and forth with the student, and posed questions of what should be capitalized and what shouldn’t. Alexis showed off her creativity, incorporating her student’s favorite food into the interactive lesson. She then had her student correct capitalization errors, then write her own sentences based on the story they read together. Alexis described her student’s reaction to the lesson: “My student loved it! Having a 'cheat sheet' for capitalization rules was a very helpful tool. At first, she used it very frequently, but she started using it less and less by the end. She loved having something she created to look at for help, instead of just relying on me. She loved utilizing her creativity.”

—Alexis Alexander, Double Certified Tutor and Assistant Coordinator and Alyssa Rubio, Central Coordinator

I was excited to return to ReadersPlus this fall as it was something I really enjoyed doing last year, and I found it to be a really rewarding experience. This semester has been very different from last semester, and I’ve gained so much from it. I love being able to help the greater USC community and being a role model. I had not really realized what an impact we have on these kids’ lives until this semester. My students have gained someone that they can look up to and trust. They are not afraid to mess up when we are doing work because they know I am here to help. They are also gaining someone they can talk to besides a teacher or a parent. This helps them a lot because I’ve become a confidante that they can come to about their home or school life. This is also the first semester that I am helping with the after school program. It is nice to know that we can provide extra homework help and helping to keep them on track.

—Lillian Brownfield, Literacy Tutor

Wonderkids, presented every Tuesday and Thursday after school, is a great way for kids to learn interesting STEM material they otherwise may not learn in the classroom. The polar science unit was a fun and interactive way for both tutors and students to engage with the material and each other. First, we asked the students what they knew about polar bears, then we read a story involving polar bears. Afterwards, the tutors and students talked about what they learned from the story to make sure they understood the subject. Finally, we ended with a game where a few kids were polar bears and the rest were fish. Polar bears had to tag the fish running across the river. The activity was extremely fun and the kids loved it. It was great to see the enthusiasm from all the students. The lesson gave me some insight into how I could implement a lesson plan better for my one-on-ones.

—Juan Cameros, Literacy Tutor
My first grade student Drake has been challenging but rewarding to teach. He does not sit still and is picky about the activities we do in our one-on-one sessions. To combat this, I have had to get extra creative when planning our lessons, while also remaining in charge and staying focused on our lesson. For example, one time he wanted to play Jenga instead of doing our lesson, and after I would not give in, he put his head down and refused to move. That experience made him realize that he would not be able to push me into letting him do whatever he wants, and he has been much more well-behaved since. He still pushes for little things, like asking for two stickers instead of one, but he understands that he needs to do the lessons before we can play any games. Additionally, Drake has improved his behavior because of the active lessons we do. For example, Drake loves basketball so we have played games where he reads or hears a word and throws dice into a bucket labeled with the sound in that word. I hope that my active lesson plans continue to help Drake associate reading with fun.

—Rayna Koishikawa, Literacy Tutor

Behavior Management with Fun Lessons

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—Rayna Koishikawa, Literacy Tutor

My First Semester with ReadersPlus

My experience with ReadersPlus so far has been incredibly rewarding, and I have learned a lot being in this program. While I mentor students and provide the tools to improve their literacy skills and confidence in reading, I also learn along with our students. I have learned to become a more adaptable individual in the program. I always put my students’ needs first to create an environment where they can optimize their full learning potential, while also demonstrating the benefits they gain from reading. I have also learned to be more patient. If one of my students is still struggling in an area, we keep tackling it with different methods until they understand the concept. As I continue being a part of ReadersPlus, I hope to keep improving on my creativity when it comes to creating lesson plans when teaching new concepts to my students, and to also improve my problem solving skills when certain methods are not working. I have learned that students enjoy learning when you take the time to incorporate things they love into the lessons. Even though a student might not get to see their tutor very often, they look forward to their time together.

—Giselle Dominguez, Literacy Tutor
Fears Turned Into Progress

My first semester at ReadersPlus was a very enriching experience, and it continues to be a joy to work with students in the local community. Now that I am in my third semester at ReadersPlus, I feel I have learned a lot about what it means to be an effective tutor. In my first semester, I was afraid I would not have as great of an impact on the students as I had hoped. I was worried that I wouldn’t be able to transform something as scary as fifth grade math into something fun and understandable, or that my one-on-one sessions would be something my students dreaded. In reality, I have learned that approaching topics in a unique way can greatly influence each child’s attitude toward learning. I’ve learned that taking the time to get to know my students during the first few sessions helps in planning lessons that fit each child’s specific interests. This provides the student with positive outlooks on the topic we work on each week. Giving students opportunities to learn in new, creative ways can positively transform the way they view school and learning, which is essential for academic success at any grade level.

—Whitney Lawrence, Double-Certified Tutor

A Lesson in Respect with Little Yoginis

Once a week our students in our after school program participate in Little Yoginis. Recently I taught a yoga lesson focused on self-respect. We began by reading Horton Hatches the Egg by Dr. Seuss and explored the meaning of respect. Throughout the book we discussed how certain characters showed respect for themselves and others, while some characters did not. The students were quick to contribute to the conversation and thoroughly enjoyed the story. The students then began the yoga practice. We started with deep breathing, which was very calming and prepared them for balancing. I introduced two new poses that challenged the students. When they lost their balance or had to stop and try the pose again, they learned to accept that more practice will help them succeed, and to appreciate their bodies’ strength as they are. Afterward, they were enthusiastic about reviewing their favorite yoga poses. Many exclaimed that they had improved the poses since their last yoga lesson. We then finished with savasana, or the corpse pose. We reviewed deep restful breathing that begins with the stomach and fills the lungs and throat. Lastly, the students had a moment to reflect and thank their bodies for giving them the ability to accomplish anything.

—Chloe Hudson, Literacy Tutor

Enthusiasm for Counting

So Dam Park won October’s Lesson Plan Challenge, incorporating the book Olivia and the Fairy Princesses by Ian Falconer into a great counting math lesson for her kindergartener. She began the lesson by reading the story aloud, while at the same time counting how many accessories the main character had on each page. So Dam modeled how to count to one hundred, and together they completed an activity which involved counting beads up to one hundred. Then, her student was able to make her own necklace, using the beads she had just counted. So Dam described her lesson as a success: “Kailey really enjoyed the lesson and was excited to count. She loved how she was able to make herself a necklace like Olivia, and at the end of the lesson, Kailey asked if she can do another lesson just like the beads one so she can make a bracelet.”

—So Dam Park, Math Tutor and Assistant Coordinator and Alyssa Rubio, Central Coordinator
What ReadersPlus Means to Me

I love ReadersPlus. There is nothing else that has satisfied me more than working with this program. It is amazing knowing that you are part of something beautiful, and that through your work you are changing someone’s life in a positive way, because that is what we do—we change these children’s lives by providing the support they need. ReadersPlus is a great support group for me as well that is rarely seen, and I know that whenever I need something, there are people here to help me. I have put my heart into this program, and if I could, I would stay here forever. I am sad knowing that this is my last year, but I know that the memories of the past three years will always be with me.

—Edna Barco, Math Tutor

How to Be an Effective Tutor

Although I have previous experience working with students at risk of falling behind in school, the transition to ReadersPlus was more challenging than I anticipated. The goals of this program are more comprehensive, and therefore require more planning and foresight. I discovered this during training, going over lesson plans and how to keep our students’ attention to make their one-on-one sessions with us more valuable. Achieving that balance required relating to each of my students’ personalities and interests—what worked for my kindergartener did not necessarily work for my second grader. I learned that a session with your student is not going to be nearly as effective or meaningful if you are not actively engaged with their interests and learning styles. Once you figure those out, there is a wealth of resources and ideas that can be utilized in shaping lesson plans around them.

—Dylan Doyle, Math Tutor

Learning About Contractions

Julia Carboni showed off her great lesson planning skills in a literacy lesson plan for her third grade student Lisa. The lesson revolved around Lisa’s interests and learning styles, featuring the Disney Press book Princess Bedtime Stories: The Mixed-up Morning. The lesson revolved around contractions, in which they counted together how many appeared in the story. Julia explained her lesson further: “Lisa seems to have a better understanding of how contractions are formed after we made the strips of paper. We folded them to form contractions and unfolded them to reveal the two-word phrases. She also enjoyed filling out the sentences written on the cut-out butterfly and had fun decorating the page.” Julia was able to create a successful lesson that ended with something her student was able to take home.

—Julia Carboni, Literacy Tutor

and Alyssa Rubio, Central Coordinator
The Impact of ReadersPlus

Mentoring and tutoring my students has been one of the most meaningful experiences I have had. When I first met my students last year, they were convinced that they were not smart and were incapable of great things. As their mentor, I encouraged them to try harder and believe in themselves more. Through our sessions, they gained confidence and realized their strengths, simply from getting the individualized attention they needed.

As a ReadersPlus tutor, I know I have the potential to make a difference. I have an immense responsibility to help these students. ReadersPlus has made me realize how much I love children and teaching, and it has made me reconsider the path I want to take in life. I am now considering going into teaching or educational policy because I have seen first hand, for two semesters, the power of education and how it shapes one’s life and outlook.

—Angela Villamizar, Literacy Tutor

Relating to Students

A highlight of my day is going to site and working with my students who are always excited and optimistic about learning and expanding their reading abilities. I am able to relate to my students, using my own personal experience of having difficulty with reading and math when I was younger. It shows them that even though I am in college now, I did not get here because it was easy—I worked hard to get here, which is something they are fully capable of as well. It encourages them if they feel discouraged, and it teaches them that everyone succeeds at their own pace. Students in the after school program that have previously dreaded doing their homework have had a complete attitude change, eagerly sharing their progress on multiplication tables or reading improvement with me. I love seeing students realize that with persistence and practice, everyone is capable of achieving the same success. Above all, the best part about ReadersPlus has been having the opportunity to serve as a mentor to students who each remind me a bit of myself when I was younger, and I look forward to continuing this mentor role.

—Kortney Casanova, Literacy Tutor

Silly Soup Session

Literacy tutor Mato Standing Soldier challenged his student Chris with comprehension and spelling in a great lesson plan revolved around the book *Roberto and Me* by Dan Gutman. Mato introduced this lesson by explaining that some words can be found within other words (like “starter”). They then read the story aloud and sounded out words, breaking them down by roots, syllables, or possible compound words. Afterwards, they created an alphabet soup, using letters found in each ingredient to make the soup. Mato explained how his student reacted to this lesson: “Chris really enjoyed the lesson. He thought it was completely silly and ridiculous when I mentioned we were going to be making soup after we finished reading. To this day, he and I still joke about making soup together. The alphabet soup activity is silly, but interactive and very effective!”

—Mato Standing Soldier, Literacy Tutor and Alyssa Rubio, Central Coordinator
I have always taken an interest in helping and tutoring young children. It was because of this that I was eager to apply for ReadersPlus. It was something that I knew I would love doing, and it has proven to be so. From this semester, I have improved in my interactions with children and getting them to focus on the tasks at hand. I have learned how to cater to a student’s learning style and design a three-part lesson plan that provides more meaning to the topics. ReadersPlus has been an overall gratifying experience, as the kids grow more comfortable and look forward to seeing me every week. For them, I believe ReadersPlus offers them the individual attention they need to grasp certain concepts and gives them extra boosts of confidence they need. I am always supportive of them and assure them that they are succeeding. I also motivate them to go above and beyond in math by challenging them once they understand a concept. I make them look at the bigger picture when it comes to applying these concepts to life in a way that doesn’t make math seem like a chore. I hope that I have instilled the drive in them to follow through when faced with a difficulty, and see it as more of a challenge than an obstacle.

—Carol Abrajan, Math Tutor

My student Mia has shown remarkable improvement throughout the semester so far. Initially she struggled with her multiplication and division tables, but has since improved. Our review and incorporation of division flash cards into games has helped a great deal. One lesson plan I created involved a mini board game, featuring various math activities. One activity was a timed challenge with multiplication or division problems. She steadily grew faster with this challenge, passing the timed mark I specified, and proceeded to win the game. Mia has also easily grasped other math concepts that once proved difficult, like finding areas. We used small squares to build rectangles to find the area, and then drew our own rectangles and found the area of those as well. Mia also found exponents difficult, but after a lesson on how exponents relate to multiplication, she was able to solve those problems with ease. Mia continues to show an eagerness to learn and improve in areas where she struggles, and her progress can be seen week by week.

—Elliott Kramer, Math Tutor

With the support from the central staff, I have learned new ways to help my students improve on specific concepts that they struggle with. For example, some of my students have difficulty with pronunciation. However, using different colors for each vowel sound and writing them on colorful construction paper make the lesson much more appealing to the students. I will be using this strategy because it will help my students substantially, assisting them with comprehension and overall improvement of their reading. My prior experiences tutoring were with older students, however, I now feel more prepared to assist the younger students because of the help I received from central staff.

—Selamay Seife, Literacy Tutor
Wonderkids Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the following sponsors and guest speakers for sharing their time and resources to enhance our Wonderkids program.

The Deep Sea unit was funded by the Center for Dark Energy Biosphere Investigation (C-DEBI), which also provided funding for Ph.D. candidate Gus Ramirez to guest speak at Vermont Elementary. Additional guest speaker was Linda Chilton (Education Programs Manager for USC SeaGrant and JOIDES Deep Sea Teacher).

The Virtual Reality unit was funded by WeLens. They absorbed the cost of supplies, VR cardboard headsets for students to take home, and their own staff time to bring Gear VR Headsets for the students to test at 32nd Street School. Guest speakers included Mika Hasak (Head of Business Development, WeLens) and Raymond Mosco (VR Professional, WeLens).

The Polar Science unit was funded in part by PolarTREC, providing funding for Dr. Byron Crump (Polar Scientist and Professor at Oregon State) to guest speak at Vermont Elementary. Additional guest speaker was DJ Kast (PolarTREC Teacher).

The Veterinary Science unit included guest speakers Renee Castorena (Veterinary Technician, Pasadena Pet Clinic) and Maria Libonate (Veterinary Assistant, VCA Venice Boulevard Animal Hospital).

My Experience with ReadersPlus

I joined ReadersPlus my first semester at USC. At the time, I was a sophomore transfer student simply looking for a job, but what I had stumbled upon was so much greater than I was expecting. I stumbled upon a community, a family, a home. Throughout the year I tutored three different students at John Mack in literacy, being able to make an impact on their education. Tutoring these kids further fueled my passion for education and teaching, and made me reevaluate how I saw my own education. I valued my time as a tutor so much, but I felt I needed to push myself further in the program. With the help from the Literacy Director, Eric, I looked for a way to have a bigger role at ReadersPlus with even greater responsibilities. And thus, my time as Central Coordinator had arrived. Being Central Coordinator has proven to be such a rewarding experience. Initially I didn’t know how I would transition to this position, working in the central office. Though there was a learning curve to everything, I managed to get the hang of it faster than I expected. I am grateful for the other central staff members and their constant support. I am grateful for our tutors that continue the work that I loved doing so much. I am grateful for the site coordinators that keep their schools running smoothly. I am incredibly grateful for this program.

—Alyssa Rubio, Central Coordinator
The Joint Educational Project

USC ReadersPlus is an “America Reads/America Counts” literacy and math tutoring program under the USC Dana and David Dornsife College of Letters, Arts, and Sciences.

The Program is administered by the Joint Educational Project and funded in part through the USC Good Neighbor’s Campaign with the support of the USC Financial Aid Office. Our tutors work with seven of the “Family of Schools” surrounding USC.

In 1997, President Clinton launched legislation that would provide additional work-study money to colleges and universities with the condition that a large portion of it go to one-on-one literacy programs for children grade K-6. The JEP version of America Reads was the first in the nation to begin working under these guidelines, launching in May 19, 1997. In May of 1999, America Counts was added to include math education and it was at this time that the USC Readers program was changed to USC ReadersPlus.

About Us

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